

# **WORKPLACE LEARNING, CONTEXTUALITY AND CULTURAL TEXTS:**

**A case study of Taylorism in  
Incoming Customer Service Call Centres**

by  
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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

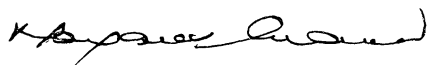
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## CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student



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## **Abstract**

The relationship between workplace contextuality and workplace learning is part of an ongoing academic, educational discourse. While enlightening in general terms, this thesis represents original research focusing more specifically on workplace learning in incoming customer service call centres.

Investigating references to “revitalised Taylorism” in general terms, and “an engineering model” in specific call centre terms, the research confirms that at the core of call centre contextuality lies the adaptation of F.W. Taylor’s late 19<sup>th</sup> century Scientific Management philosophy and the call centre model for efficiency performance management. Over the passage of time this Taylorist adaptation in contemporary call centres practices grounds an argument to view incoming customer service centres as a unique ethnographical and cultural business community shaped by past practices and artifacts, folk knowledge and enduring behavioural patterns. These in turn shape workplace learning frames of reference “embodied in the signs, symbols, and language or the semiotics of culture” (Merriam & Associates 2002, p.236).

The main body of the research then focuses on workplace pedagogy. It proposes that workplace artifacts become embodied in cultural texts (such as written curricula, oral/aural storytelling, semiotic language and semiotic displays) which act as teaching and learning conduits. Specific artifacts and cultural texts are examined from the perspective of Korczynski’s claim (in Deery & Kinnie 2002) that call centre performance management and measurement are infused with two logics, that of cost-efficiency and customer-orientation.

The originality of the research lies in two key areas of contribution. The first is the rigour applied to situating workplace contextuality as a framework within which understandings of workplace learning can be interpreted. The second, as a consequence, is a fresh approach to



workplace learning, and one which legitimises the workplace as an ethnographic, cultural community which teaches and learns through cultural texts. Examining workplace learning from this perspective raises the profile of workplace artifacts, socialisation and semiotics (including semiotic language) as significant workplace learning conduits. The thesis challenges existing understandings which act to constrain a broader interpretation of learning agencies such as literacy, culture, semiotics and texts in assigning relevant workplace meaning and knowledge constructs in their frames of reference.